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AUTHOR	Towell, Janet H.; Schulz, Armin; Demetrulias, Diana Mayer
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ABSTRACT

To discover the educational and social implications of identity formation and reader response when using multicultural literature with children in the primary grades, a study analyzed the responses of 110 primary-aged children in central California to eight books that portrayed male and female children from four ethnic groups in America: Asian Americans, African Americans, European Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Overall, no evidence was found to indicate that children in the primary grades respond differently to children's books based on the ethnicity of the main characters. Findings suggest that a good story may transcend ethnicity in the minds of young children. (Contains 11 references and an eight-item annotated bibliography of the children's books used in the study.) (Author/NKA)

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Does Ethnicity *Really* Matter in Literature for Young Children?

Janet H. Towell

Armin Schulz

and

Diana Mayer Demetrulias

California State University, Stanislaus

801 W. Monte Vista Avenue

Turlock, California 95382

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Running Head: Ethnicity in Children's Literature

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Abstract

The researchers analyzed the responses of 110 primary-aged children to eight books that portrayed male and female children from four ethnic groups in America: Asian-Americans, African-Americans, European-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans. Overall, no evidence was found to indicate that children in the primary grades respond differentially to children's books based on the ethnicity of the main characters. The results of this study indicate that a good story may transcend ethnicity in the minds of young children.

Does Ethnicity *Really* Matter in Literature for Young Children?

Prior to this study, our premise as teacher-researchers in education had been that ethnicity *does* matter in multicultural literature for children in the primary grades because of the growing diversity of cultural and ethnic populations in today's classrooms. Ebonics, as portrayed in African-American literature such as Flossie and the Fox by Patricia McKissack, should be valued. We believed that an emphasis on multicultural learning should be inclusive rather than additive, so that students of all ethnicities, languages, and cultures first view the commonality of being human—with related justices and injustices—before searching for differences.

Therefore, when sharing multicultural literature, we felt it was important to emphasize the elements of aesthetic reading and response, which evoke personal or emotional reactions related to valuing and understanding (Rosenblatt, 1976; Squires, 1990; Langer, 1982). It was our belief that the meaning-making students gather from the encountered text is deeply rooted in prior knowledge and the quality and quantity of past experiences. In reader response theory, a critical aspect is the extent to which ethnic depiction encourages or deters the child's positive response to the character and the enjoyment of the story. Learned or acquired conditioning (i.e. prejudice), and identity/self esteem are also important variables for reader response.

Identity is a broad construct, forming a rich body of research that is often related to other psychological features such as self-esteem and self-concept. For this study, identity is defined as a psychological sense or consciousness of self within the context of social reality (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Likewise, identity formation is the process by which children develop their identity. For all children, identity formation is

multifaceted and reflects biological, psychological, historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors. A synthesis of the research literature by Spencer & Markstrom-Adams (1990) indicates the complexity of identity formation among minority children and adolescents, the barriers to the process of identity formation for minority youth, and the prevention and intervention strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover the educational and social implications of identity formation and reader response when using mulitcultural literature with children in the primary grades. To what degree do children's books influence children's understanding of ethnicity -- their own and that of other children? Results of the study raised the possibility that ethnicity may *not* have a significant influence in literature for young children.

The study was designed to examine young children's responses to the portrayal of ethnicity in children's literature. The intent of this research study with primary aged children from grades K-3 was to explore their reactions and responses to current trade (library) books that portrayed children from different ethnic groups in typically American settings. Eight books were selected for this study representing four groups: African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and European-Americans. Both male and female characters were represented in the selections.

The researchers focused on the following issues:

- Are there developmental ages (as grouped by grade level) at which ethnicity is identified as a feature of characters in children's literature?

- Do children identify the ethnicity of the characters in children's literature as similar or dissimilar to their own ethnicity?
- To what degree do children like or dislike books in which ethnicity is depicted?

Methodology

Subjects

The sample for the study consisted of 110 young children; 41% (45) were boys and 59% (65) were girls enrolled in kindergarten through grade 3. The sample included the selection of four classrooms of children, one class at each grade level. Each class was selected for its proportional representation of children from various racial groups. The sample included 5.4% African-Americans, 3.6% Asian-Americans, 16.3% Hispanic-Americans, 68.3% European-Americans, and 6.3% of mixed heritage. The children were enrolled in elementary schools in proximity to a university in central California and represented two school districts. Two low economic level schools and two middle economic level schools were selected; two in a rather small town of 40,000 and two in a larger urban area of approximately 100,000.

Procedure

The methodology for studying ethnic identification and preferences was to read four selected books to each child. Two university researchers collected data for the study. One was responsible for kindergarten and second grade; the other for grades one and three. Using this procedure, children were asked questions during individual interviews related to their preferences toward and identification with characters in the children's books. Their responses were transcribed for content analyses by the researchers.

The study included the following children's multiethnic books (see short annotations of these selections in Appendix):

African-American

(male) Willie's Not the Hugging Kind by Joyce Durham Barrett

(female) Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman

Asian-American

(male) The Lost Lake by Allen Say

(female) Angel Child, Dragon Child by Michele Maria Surat

European-American

(male) Someday Rider by Ann Herbert Scott

(female) Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

Hispanic-American

(male) With My Brother by Eileen Roe

(female) Abuela by Arthur Dorris

Several criteria were employed in the selection of the literary works. For example, two different titles in which a main character of a specified racial group were used to reduce the possibility of the responses as a function of the child's preference for a specific literary work. For each of the pairs of books within an ethnic group, a book with a male and female main character was selected so as to control for the effect of gender on children's responses. Additional criteria for book selection included length (able to be read in 10-12 minutes), fiction only, depiction of children in an setting within the United States rather than the world community, and color illustrations. Stereotypic aspects were avoided.

Several procedural decisions were made so as to control for the contaminating effects of other variables. For example, the children were read to in groups no larger than eight, thereby minimizing the time between the

reading of the book and the children's interview. The order in which the books were read was varied, and the reader of the books for each class was consistent so as to control for possible effects of the reader's oral skills and emphasis of content. No introduction to the books was given to provide for consistency within the study. The researchers wanted to avoid influencing the students' opinions of the text. Finally, a teacher survey was used to gather information about the teachers' approach toward the multicultural curricula in their classrooms. The results of the survey were coded for possible effects of the teacher's curricular decisions on any observed differences among the children's taped responses. Interviews were done after individual readings in a timely manner with less than a 30 minute lapse.

The data were analyzed using a chi-square content analysis with the children's ethnicity as the independent variable. Analyses were also performed to discern possible differences in responses as a result of gender and grade level.

Results

The results of each focus area will be discussed separately. Initially, the researchers' hypothesis was that older primary children tend to recognize ethnicity in literature more than younger children. The researchers were interested in the issue of prejudice. When does it occur? When do children start to notice color in children's literature?

Are there developmental ages (grade levels) at which ethnicity is identified as a feature of the characters in children's literature?

The children were asked to describe the characters in the books (both in terms of "What do they look like?" and " How do they act?"). Their responses indicate that overall approximately half of the children did not include ethnicity in their descriptions. They responded with adjectives (such

as fine, friendly, real, normal), with reference to clothing or a physical feature (such as missing teeth or wearing glasses), or with comparison to a person they know (usually brother/sister). One child answered with a sigh, followed by "They're people, just people."

Forty-one percent of the children cited ethnic characteristics, typically skin color (black, brown, white, tan) or ethnic group identity such as Hispanic, Chinese, or Vietnamese. These citations were neutral descriptors in 99% of the cases. The inability of some children to differentiate between Asian characters was apparent in responses to the characters in Lost Lake and Angel Child.

The children depicted the behavior of the book's characters as positive in 40% of the cases, with 12% negative responses and 45% neutral responses. Willie's Not the Hugging Kind accounted for the largest percentage of behaviors described as negative; however the negative responses were not related to ethnicity.

Do children identify a character as similar or dissimilar to their own ethnic group?

Children were asked the question: "Is there anyone in the book who is a lot like you?" If they answered "yes," they were asked in what way the person was like them. If they answered "no," they were asked in what ways the person was different from themselves.

Overall, 38.5% of the children stated that they were a lot like the characters in the books. A majority of reasons were related to the plots of the stories and similar interests (such as dressing up, riding horses, using their imagination, camping, a mom who always says "someday" to a request, same name). A few children identified with the adult characters in the books. One

child said he was like Abuela's father who liked to smile and wave. Another liked the father in Lost Lake who enjoyed sleeping in the wilderness.

In comparison, 59.5% said they were not like the characters in the books. Of those who said the characters were not like themselves, the largest proportion did not cite ethnicity as the reason for the difference. Their reasons generally included references to the plot of the stories (such as "I don't fly. . . . I don't have a brother to play ball with. . . . I don't live in the city"). Twenty-eight percent of the children cited ethnicity as the reason they were not like the characters ("The dad has a lighter face; I have a darker face. . . I have spikey hair. . . I speak English. . . Her eyes are different - curved. . . They are black and I'm brown because the sun got me"); 13% cited gender differences.

To what degree do children like or dislike books in which ethnicity is depicted?

The children were asked why they did or did not like each of the books. The results indicated that overall 96% of the children liked all the four books read to them, and 94% of these children liked the books without reference to ethnicity as one of the reasons. For example, after listening to Amazing Grace a third grader said, "I think it's a good book because it helps people - because once you put your mind to something, you don't give up." A first grader responded to the aesthetic value of the literature in Abuela: "I liked the colors of the clouds. Sometimes when it stops raining, There's yellow and purple and pink like in the book. When my family goes on trips, we try to find rainbow colors in the clouds." Three percent of the children stated they did not like one or more books, but they too gave reasons without reference to ethnicity. No statistically significant differences using a chi square content

analysis were found for differences in responses to this question based on the literary selection, the child's gender, or the child's ethnicity.

Teacher Interviews

The four teachers indicated that they approached multicultural valuing and understanding through various methodologies. These included special units of study, integrated curricular approaches, social/affective activities, and art and music emphasis in curriculum units of study. Of the eight books in this study, only Owl Moon had been read to one class by one teacher. The other teachers had not used any of the books in classroom instruction.

Limitations

The ethnicity of both the children and the researchers may affect findings. Both university researchers were European-American. Some indication exists in the research literature that children demonstrate differential performance and expression of attitudes when the researcher is of their own ethnicity (Annis & Corenblum, 1987). As the development of identity results from reflection and thoughtfulness about self and others, it is possible that the young children in this sample, were not able to articulate fully their understanding of race and ethnicity. The study was limited to young children in a limited geographical region.

Summary

What is the influence of ethnicity in multicultural literature on young children, on their attitudes toward themselves and others? Children in this study identified with characters in the stories based on the plots and similar interests rather than relating to ethnicity. They identified with characters based on their personalities rather than their skin color ("I'm not afraid of the dark. . . I lose my temper sometime. . . I like to read books"). The majority of the children liked the books without reference to ethnicity as one of the

reasons except for a few children in grades two and three. According to these results, ethnicity does not seem to have a significant influence in children's literature in the primary grades. A good story transcends ethnicity. Prejudice does not seem to be overtly acted upon in the early years, at least through grade three.

The results of this study raise some interesting questions. When does ethnicity in children's literature begin to make a difference in reader response and identity formation? Should teachers emphasize identity formation in a positive way in the primary grades or let children's ethnicity, self-concept, and self-esteem be colored later by the influences of their world? In light of this study, what are the advantages of emphasizing multiculturalism and multiethnic literature in the primary grades? Does this help children to feel accepted, appreciated, and valued for their unique characteristics and ethnicty? Should Ebonics, as portrayed in African-American literature, be valued? More research is needed to determine the answers to these provocative questions.

This study should be replicated in the intermediate grades (4-6) to determine when and if children respond differently to the portrayal of ethnicity in literature as they get older. This study should also be replicated in other regions of the country to determine if there are similar conclusions. Our goal is for children, especially children of color, to believe they can "be what they want to be if they just set their minds to it," according to Nana's advice in Amazing Grace, by Mary Hoffman (1991). Quality children's literature, rather than ethnicity, seems to be what matters, at least in the primary grades.

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Appendix

Short Annotations:

Books Used in Research Project

Someday Rider by Ann Herbert Scott (1989). Illustrated by Ronald Himler. New York: Clarion Books.

Young cowboy, Kenny, wants to be able to go out with his father and the other ranch hands each day, but keeps getting reminded that he is still "too young" to go along, but maybe someday. His mother, sensing his frustration, help him learn to ride a horse to prepare him for the day that he is "big enough" and will get to go along and help with the roundup.

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen (1987). Illustrated by John Schoenherr. New York: Philomel.

When a young girl has the opportunity to go owling with her father, she knows that she is in for a very special experience. Trudging quietly through the snowy woods late a night, this pair finally encounters a majestic owl and cherishes a special moment with nature.

Willie's Not the Hugging Kind by Joyce Durham Barrett (1989). Illustrated by Pat Cummings. New York: Harper Trophy.

Young Willie gets teased by his friends about being too affectionate with his family, so Willie decides to give up hugging completely. He soon discovers what a wonderful thing he is missing, however, and finds a way to become the "hugging kind" again.

Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman (1991). Illustrated by Caroline Binch. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Through her imagination, Grace transports herself to many different places and play many different roles. Grace wants to be Peter Pan in the

class play, but two of her friends discourage her because she is a girl and because she is Black. Grace's very wise mother and grandmother remind her that she can be whatever she wants to be if she just sets her mind to it.

Abuela by Arthur Dorris (1991). Illustrated by Elika Kleven (Hispanic female). New York: Dutton Children's Books.

A fantasy that tells of a wonderful day that Rosa and her grandmother (abuela) have while taking an excursion. Rosa imagines that she and her abuela can fly like birds. In their flight they visit many places in New York City before touching ground again and finishing their day together. Spanish phrases are used to add authenticity to the story.

With My Brother by Eileen Roe (1991). Illustrated by Robert Casilla. New York: Bradbury Press.

This story, told in two languages, depicts the nurturing and bonding between a young boy and his older brother. The young boy can hardly wait until he is older so that he can do the things his older brother does.

The Lost Lake written and illustrated by Allan Say (1989). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

A young boy and his father go on a camping excursion to the "lost" lake, a favorite spot of the father's as a young boy. But things have changed: the "lost" lake has been found by many other campers and the father wants to hike farther. This story is a gentle tale about parent-child bonding and sharing.

Angel Child, Dragon Child , by Michele Maria Surat (1983). Illustrated by Vo-Dinh Mai. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Adjusting to America is not an easy task for Ut and her brothers and sisters, especially because her mother is still in Vietnam. Ut especially has trouble with Raymond, a young boy in her room who seems determined to make her life miserable. They are forced to become friends when the school principal requires then to help each other.